

Diminution of the Freedom of the Press in Singapore under the Regime of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew

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An Overview

Former President Thomas Jefferson once wrote that if he had to decide whether there should be a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, he would not hesitate in choosing the latter.¹ Unfortunately, it appears that it is the former situation that is rapidly becoming the norm in many developing countries. This is eloquently illustrated by writers from the so-called Third World, including Professor A.B. Assensoh of Ghana in the May 1990 issue of *African Commentary*.² Although Professor Assensoh's article deals primarily with burgeoning economic and political problems of Africa, it also underscores the attendant loss of freedom of the press (among many others) in some African nations. It could have just as easily been written about many other countries throughout the world, where the freedom of the press is constantly under attack. There are several examples to illustrate this trend but happily, some painful inimical instances have recently been reversed while others have not.

In Nicaragua, for example, the Sandinista regime closed down *La Prensa*, the country's only independent newspaper, and the main reason was that it printed

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¹"To Colonel Edward Carrington," Paris, January 16, 1787, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Albert Ellery Beigh, (ed.), The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, Washington, D.C., Vol. VI, p. 55.

²A.B. Assensoh, "Africa's Economic and Political Pains in the 1990s," *African Commentary*, May, 1990, pp. 53-54.

unauthorized material critical of the government.³ In fact, just a few days before the sad circumstances of *La Prensa* took place, the Turkish Government indefinitely suspended the publication of a conservative newspaper in Turkey for publishing an editorial that criticized military regimes.⁴ Again, as recently, as May, 1991, Turkish officials expelled from Turkey reporters of *The Independent*, a London-based paper. This was done because they had allegedly distorted the truth in their reports about the country. Their real offense was in reporting rumors that some of the Turkish soldiers along the Iraqi border were allegedly stealing supplies destined to aid Kurdish refugees from the Persian Gulf War, and for subsequently calling on the international community to investigate the rumors.⁵

In the Philippines, former President Ferdinand Marcos' troops raided the offices of a weekly paper that had reported that members of the government had plotted to assassinate opposition leader Benigno Aquino.⁶ Later, however, the assassination took place in full view of the newspaper reporters and television cameras. Even more recently, in the Soviet Union, the news media reported that Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Republic, who is seen as an avowed democratic leader, closed down the newspaper, *Pravda*. This action was taken because the paper was the official organ of the now discredited Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It, therefore appears that even regimes that are professing to be more open and democratic cannot tolerate public criticism or opposition.

The Singapore Situation

Nowhere is this repression of journalists more evident than in Singapore under the regime of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. The prime minister began a deliberate campaign to, as he once said, "tame the domestic press."

Since becoming an independent republic in 1965, Singapore, the modern city-state, has surged to the forefront of the Pacific Rim nations in economic growth. Its prolific and expanding economy ranks Singapore alongside Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan.

In addition to Singapore's better education, higher literacy rates, higher incomes, and more leisure time, it has experienced a phenomenal media development. Paradoxically, the country has also suffered a loss of press freedom under the government

³*The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 1983, p. 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, August 12, 1983, pp. 4 and 25.

⁵*Baton Rouge Sunday Advocate*, (dateline London), "Lie Alleged," May 5, 1991, p. 3A.

⁶*Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 1983, p. 3.

of long time prime minister Lee.⁷

However, since its independence, Singapore has operated under a parliamentary system of government, which has been periodically soiled and sullied by increasing manifestations of aggressive and repressive authoritarianism. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the government's dealing with the news media, especially the local newspapers.

In 1965, Singapore had an estimated population of about 1.9 million people, divided into approximately 75% Chinese, 15% Malay, 8% Indian and Pakistani, and the remainder a hodgepodge of Europeans and others. Even then, it had an active news media, with an estimated 389,000 radios and 98,000 television receivers in addition to several newspapers. By 1966, T.V. Singapore had embarked on a multi-million-dollar construction program, underwritten, in part, by the government.⁸ In recent years, the government, through T.V. Singapore, has embarked upon its own print media program, forcing some local papers to enter into a partnership⁹ that is to the detriment of the free flow of information to its citizens. It was only in 1971 that newspaper circulation approached the number of radio and television sets on the island. That year, there were 13 daily newspapers with a combined readership of about 635,000.¹⁰ The same year, the government of Singapore, under former Prime Minister Lee's velvet-glove authoritarianism, began to crack down on newspapers.

The former prime minister, who has been called by many as being "brilliant and combative," would not allow too strong a political opposition or what he perceives to be opposition at all.¹¹ During the 1960s and '70s, Prime Minister Lee, like many other leaders from developing nations, was opposed to the proliferation of the so-called "hippy culture." When a local newspaper, the *Singapore Herald*, did not join the chorus against the hippies, it came into opposition with Mr. Lee. In the ensuing political fray, the *Singapore Herald* lost and it was forced to close down.¹² In the same period, newspaper readership over-all had soared to more than 1/2 million.

This then, was one of the paradoxes of Singapore: at the very time that the government was cracking down on newspapers, the print media's overall circulation increased. This was probably the result of the increasingly literate population. Another explanation is that the entire city-state is practically a closed corporation,

⁷William A. Hachten, "Media Development Without Press Freedom: Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore," *Journalism Quarterly*, Winter, 1989, Vol. 66 #24, p. 822.

⁸*Far Eastern Economic Review Yearbook*, 1968, p. 303.

⁹*Strait Times*, June 18, 1984; *The Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 1988, p. 38.

¹⁰*Far Eastern Economic Review Yearbook*, 1968, p. 306.

¹¹Hachten, "Media Development Without Press Freedom," p. 823.

¹²*Far Eastern Economic Review Yearbook*, 1972, p. 285.

actively seeking more and more business opportunities. Chief among these businesses is the printing of newspapers, books, and magazines for the entire region. Here, too, is a problem for Singapore.

At the time that Prime Minister Lee's so-called "Singapore Inc." was pursuing new businesses, his governmental policy of curtailing freedom of the press was driving many publishing houses out of the island.¹³ That was happening because more of the newspapers located in Singapore had full-time correspondents in many of the countries in the region. These correspondents regularly reported on the activities of their local governments. Also, many of the newspapers were owned by corporations in England, France, the United States, and Germany. When the CEOs of those corporations began to hear of their papers being closed down, or their circulation being reduced to a small fraction of what was normal, and their editors as well as reporters being imprisoned, they started to look for a more favorable climate for their operations.

In March of 1988, for example, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* (published by Dow Jones) announced that it would no longer be offered to readers in Singapore because of Mr. Lee's restrictions.¹⁴ Dow Jones' new base of operations would now be Bangkok.¹⁵ This was a natural reaction to Prime Minister Lee's anti-press freedom campaign. There has been a virtual litany of newspaper closures, reduction in circulation, expulsion of reporters and editorial staff from Singapore or, in some instances, denial of and refusal to renew work permits. Indeed, there was a running battle between former Prime Minister Lee and the press. Unfortunately, Mr. Lee almost invariably won because he had a compliant legislature of which 78 of the 79 members belonged to the People's Action Party, and a docile court to support his actions.

When the *Asian Wall Street Journal* refused to publish an unedited letter from a government official, its circulation was slashed so deeply as to effectively ban the paper. Dow Jones, publishers of the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, appealed to the courts for a stay of the government edict, but the request was denied.¹⁶ One may compare this action by the Singapore Court with what could happen in Malaysia.

When Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad banned the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and expelled two of its resident journalists, the action was appealed to the Malaysian high court. Several months later, the independent Supreme Court

¹³Hachten, "Media Development Without Press Freedom," pp. 826–827.

¹⁴Jay Brannigan, "Saying Goodbye to Mr. Lee," *Asian Times*, October 29, 1990, p. 91.

¹⁵Hachten, "Media Development Without Press Freedom," p. 286.

¹⁶*The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 1987, p. 11.

ruled in favor of the newspaper.¹⁷

One of former Prime Minister Lee's favorite weapons in his suppression of newspapers was the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA) and its many amendments. This law, first enacted to curb the disruptive activities of Communist agitators in the early sixties, is now sacrosanct and beyond review by the courts.¹⁸ Another tactic of the Lee regime was to amend the press law, allowing circulation of photocopies of banned or curtailed publications,¹⁹ clearly, an infringement of copyright laws. This action was the equivalent of seizure of private property. Even the U.S. Congress began to sit up and take notice then. Prime Minister Lee was in no way adverse to using the provisions of the ISA to imprison the people who criticized him or those associated with his government. When *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Asia Week*, and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, local newspapers and magazines, criticized the government for the imprisonment of student dissidents under provisions of the ISA, their circulation was slashed by about 90%.²⁰ Even in the face of such punitive and vengeful actions, *Asian Wall Street Journal* had the boldness and audacity to print a guest editorial critical of the government's actions. The writer pointed out that "heavy-handed government can derail even the most promising of nations."²¹ The government of Singapore was not adverse to using the power of the pliant courts in conventional ways to muzzle the press.

After slashing the *Far Eastern Economic Review*'s circulation so low as to be tantamount to closure, former Prime Minister Lee sued the magazine for libel over its reporting of the arrest and detention of young dissidents whom it (the government) claimed were part of a Marxist conspiracy. *Far Eastern Economic Review* announced in an editorial on January 4, 1990 that it was appealing the decision of High court Judge J.P. Thean who found the periodical had libelled the prime minister.²² Newspapers and magazines were not the only targets of Mr. Lee.

When a political opponent of the prime minister met with some officials of the United States Embassy in Singapore, he, Lee, demanded their withdrawal and an investigation into their activities. The State Department responded by asking Singapore to remove one of its envoys.²³

Even people who were formerly in the government and then criticized, or at-

¹⁷*Ibid.*, October 1, 1986, p. 2; November 4, 1986, p. 39.

¹⁸N. Balakrishnan, "Slamming the Door," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 29, 1988, p. 11.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, January 21, 1988, p. 32; February 2, 1989, p. 14; February 11, 1988, p. 32.

²⁰*The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 1987; November 10, 1987, p. 8; December 12, 1987.

²¹*Ibid.*, December 29, 1987, p. 44.

²²"Leave of Appeal," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 4, 1988, p. 4.

²³*The Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 1988, p. 16.

tempted to use the judicial process to free those jailed on what looked like spurious charges, felt the wrath of Mr. Lee.

Francis Seow, former Singapore Solicitor General and Law Society president, was jailed when he tried to get a writ of *habeas corpus* for some of the young people arrested as Marxist conspirators. Mr. Seow claimed that their alleged confessions were obtained under torture or duress. He was also critical of Prime Minister Lee, writing in an editorial that Mr. Lee was creating a closed society with a government that was intolerant of dissent.²⁴ Mr. Lee, not satisfied with the way the rest of the world was reacting to his taming of the press, went on the road with the reasons for his actions.

Appearing before the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, D.C., former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said that his restrictions on the press in Singapore were necessary to prevent the agitation and heightening of racial tensions in his diverse and multicultural nation.²⁵

In that speech, Lee said that under no circumstances could he allow foreign journalists to dictate policy or to libel his government. Mr. Lee was quoted as saying, "I am Asia, I am not America —." ²⁶

Americans can be thankful that Mr. Lee is not America just as others can be thankful that he neither is their nation, although there are those in America, and elsewhere, who find his actions laudable and would seek to emulate him.

The newspapers and magazines mentioned by name above were not the only ones the government of former Prime Minister Lee harassed. The list includes *Asia Week*, *Strait Times*, *The Economist*, *Business Week*, *U.S.A. Today*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, and the list grows.

Actually, the list grew shorter. The government forced several newspapers to sell a portion of their ownership to Singapore Press Holdings. This conglomerate was under the influence of "Singapore, Inc.," which meant that it was controlled to great extent by former Prime Minister Lee. From thirteen newspapers and magazines in 1981, with a combined readership exceeding half million, the number had shrunk to only seven in 1988, with over a million readers.

According to Professor William A. Hachten, writing in the *Journalism Quarterly*, the original 13 papers were published in Chinese, English, Malayalam, Malay, and Tamil. Those newspapers had a circulation of approximately 270 papers per 1000 population. The Chinese language newspapers, *Lianhe Zaobao* and *Wanbao*, with a

²⁴*Ibid.*, May 1, 1988, p. 20; May 11, 1988, p. 22.

²⁵Cable Systems Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN), April 1988.

²⁶Anthony Lewis, "How Tyranny Creeps," *New York Times*, May 22, 1988, p. E29.

joint readership of about 1/4 million reached almost one (1) in every five (5) people literate in the Chinese language.²⁷ In the same article, Professor Hachten pointed out that almost 4,000 books and other publications were imported into Singapore but those favorable to communism or critical of Lee were prohibited.

Since this study was begun with a quotation from the writings of former President Thomas Jefferson, it may be appropriate to end it with a quote from none other than former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, as reported by Anthony Lewis of *The New York Times*, himself a journalist of note:

... some comments by Mr. Lee in 1964, when he was an opposition politician in Malaysia. 'The closed society must produce the closed mind,' he said then. He called for 'ideas, not intimidation: persuasion, not coercion.' Mr. Lee was right the first time.²⁸

Indeed, former Prime Minister Lee, by resorting to coercion and intimidation of the press, proceeded to restrict, within his nation, the free exchange of ideas and the growth and development of an open and informed society that is made possible by a free and unfettered press, especially newspapers. By his actions, Lee almost derailed this promising nation.

Conclusion

Does the problem of the diminution of the freedom of the press in Singapore have a solution? The answer is both "No," and "Yes."

So long as the People's Action Party maintains a strangle-hold on Singapore's parliament and so long as Mr. Lee is able to hand-pick his successors to carry out his wishes, the freedom of the press may continue to lessen and diminish in importance. Also, if the government continues to intimidate members of the press with threats of imprisonment, expulsion, and denial of work visas or permits, as well as with the outright banning of publications or orders mandatory reductions in circulation of publications, the ability of the people to have access to the free and unrestricted flow of information will suffer.

The new prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, appears to be from the same mold as Mr. Lee. Indeed, he already has given the impression that Mr. Lee's aggressive anti-press campaign will continue unabated. It is very probable that Mr. Goh, the

²⁷Hachten, "Media Development Without Press Freedom," pp. 823–824; *The Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 1984, p. 30.

²⁸Anthony Lewis, "How Tyranny Creeps," *New York Times*, May 22, 1988, p. E29.

former First Deputy Prime Minister, will be Mr. Lee's hand-puppet as the "former" prime minister remains in government as a "senior minister without portfolio."²⁹

Mr. Lee's People's Action Party has dominated Parliament for many years and in that time has passed a number of laws dealing with the freedom of the press and political opposition. The most unsettling of the parliamentary acts has been the amendments to the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA) which eventually placed that act beyond judicial review.³⁰

Indeed, the problem of the lessening of press freedom in Singapore cannot be solved so long as the above conditions continue. If Mr. Goh asserts his personal independence and institutes democratic reform, the head-long rush to stifle the freedom of the press in Singapore can be halted or, at least, slowed.

The many amendments to the ISA must be repealed. Indeed, the entire Act probably should be scrapped. The governmental subsidized Singapore Press Holdings should be forced to relinquish the stock that foreign-owned or competing news agencies were forced to sell to the conglomerate and become truly competitive, and not just a docile mouth-piece for the government.

Political opposition must also be allowed. So long as Mr. Goh, like Mr. Lee before him, enjoys an almost total majority in Parliament, nothing will be done. Only when political opponents can freely, and without fear, assail the actions of the party in power can the freedom of the press be assured. Only when reporters ask penetrating questions and newspapers are critical of government without fear of reprisal can the problem be solved.

The diminution of the freedom of the press came about during former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's long struggle to transform Singapore from an erstwhile shabby British colony into the modern-day independent city-state. He succeeded, probably, beyond his own dreams. Attaining that apparently impossible dream came at the enormous expense of individual, personal liberties and submission to one-party rule.³¹ The dream has been attained and the price has been paid.

Surely, it is now the duty of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to restore those liberties, and the place to begin is with the freedom of the press.

²⁹William Branigin, "Singapore's Prime Minister Resigns," *Washington Post*, November 27, 1990, p. A14.

³⁰N. Balakrishnan, "Slamming the Door," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 29, 1988, p. 11.

³¹William Brasnigin, "New Minister of Singapore Warns of Gulf Crisis Fallout," *Washington Post*, November 29, 1990, p. A53.